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ABSTRACT

Relocation caused by employment transfers may favorably affect the attainment of career and financial goals: however, it is experienced as a stressful situation by many families and may create traumas for individual family members. If variables can be isolated that contribute to a family's adjustment to a new community, coping strategies may be developed which will enable families to minimize the psychological and emotional impact of relocation. The specific sources of stress among 122 recently transferred executives and their spouses were examined. Respondents completed questionnaires designed to elicit demographic information and information pertaining to their personal experiences and adjustments following relocation. Results indicated that after relocation, women experienced boredom, loss, depression and loneliness significantly more than men: men were significantly more enthusiastic than their wives. Respondents cited dissatisfaction with house-hunting and financing, moving companies, and quality of education in the new communities. The findings have implications for families, communities and corporations which may contribute to the family's adjustments to relocation. (NRB)

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SURVIVING A MOVE: SOURCES OF STRESS AND ADAPTION AMONG CORPORATE EXECUTIVE FAMILIES

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SURVIVING A MOVE: SOURCES OF STRESS AND ADAPTION

AMONG CORPORATE EXECUTIVE FAMILIES

Moving is stressful. This study examines the specific sources of stress among 122 recently transferred executives and their spouses. The ways in which families, communities and corporations may facilitate adaptation and coping are discussed.

Employment transfers and the visible impact of geographic dislocation have been identified as a prevalent aspect of our society. According to the U.S. Census Bureau nearly 40 million Americans, or one out of five, moved every year during the early 1970's. More than one-half of these individuals, or twenty-two million people, made moves that were job related (Gaylord, 1979). It has also been estimated that the average person entering the job market today can expect to move thirteen times and to change jobs seven times during his career (Wolfbein, 1974).

Packard (1972) observes that employee transfers contribute heavily to the breakup of families, the increased isolation of individuals, and disrupt the natural continuity of life. Defenders of employee transfers state that the negative impact of moving is vastly overrated and insist that transfers usually are beneficial to employers, employees, and their families. We contend that although the process of relocation may favorably affect the attainment of career and financial goals, it is experienced as a stressful situation by many families and may create trauma for individual family members.

Previous Studies

Both Gaylord (1979) and Feinburg (1978) speak of the range of losses experienced by family members, especially the wife, after relocation. These

losses may include giving up friends. community, a sense of self-worth and identity, close contact with relatives, and often, a job or career possibility. In contrast the husband, who has moved because of his job, is less affected by these losses. He is usually accepted at work because of his skill and credentials as an executive or professional.

Tiger (Feinburg, 1978), commenting upon the personal as well as the community loss, states that "an important consequence of the corporate commitment to moving managers around is that their wives and children are deprived of a fundamental human requirement of social continuity and personal stability, and the managers are debarred from becoming effective members of the communities in which they find themselves." One reason members of the community do not reach out to its new members is that they realize many of them will move again in a short time period, and therefore do not think it prudent to become involved with them either civically or socially.

Packard (1972) notes that on an over-all population basis, there is a greater frequency of mental illness among migrants who move across state or national lines. This raises the following questions: Are people who choose to migrate more prone to mental instability? Or, is the mental upset created by the stresses of relocating in a strange environment?

A study conducted by the Family Service Association of America, regarding experimental counseling with 25,000 recently relocated construction workers and their families, determined that sixty-two percent of the problems of families who sought counseling were related, in a real or imaginary way, to their mobility (Packard). The Center for Community Studies in Boston found that leaving a familiar neighborhood generated feelings of long-term grief in many people who had been forced to relocate due to urban renewal (Packard). Leff, Roatch, and Bunney (1970) in their study of environmental factors preceding the onset of severe depression, found

that a geographical move had been experienced by eighteen out of their forty subjects. These studies indicate, that in some cases, relocation can create severe emotional distress.

Holmes and Rahe (1967) include relocation in their classification of stressful life events. Other life events, that may occur in conjunction with relocation are also listed. These include: starting a new type of work; a change in work conditions; and a promotion or demotion.

Given that moving has been called the "life blood" of many businesses and that millions of people relocate each year, the following questions arise: What are the effects of relocation upon family members? What variables, if any, make the move a "good" or "bad" one? If certain variables can be isolated as contributing in either a positive or negative way to the family's adjustment to a new community, then perhaps coping strategies may be developed which will enable families to minimize the psychological and emotional impact of such dislocation.

METHOD

Data Collection

A questionnaire was distributed to all members present at the Roswell (Georgia) Newcomer's Club during the October 1979 meeting. The purpose of the research was explained at this time. The women were asked to respond to the questionnaire before leaving the meeting and also to have their husbands complete and return the questionnaire. Of the 172 questionnaires distributed at this time, 58 females and 22 males responded, which is a 46.51% response rate.

The Roswell Newcomer's Club was originally chosen as the sample population because of its membership being limited to persons living in the

community two years or less. The primary purpose of the club is the acculturation of newcomers into the community. Most often, the newer the member in the community, the more she/he will benefit from the club.

One hundred and sixty questionnaires were also distributed to 80 homes in an affluent subdivision in East Cobb County, Georgia. This subdivision was chosen because of its relative newness; no home is more than two and one-half years old and many are still being built. It is known as being a transient community by local realtors. A 26% response (42) was received.

Home Interviews

Respondents were asked to indicate on the questionnaire if they would be willing to participate in follow-up home interviews. Ten families were chosen from this group: seven from Roswell Newcomer's Club and three from the subdivision. Nine families had lived in the area six months or less, and four of these families stated they had adjusted in this time period. The tenth family interviewed had lived in the area approximately two years, but the wife indicated that it had taken her over one year to adjust to the new community.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire contained 21 items; four were free response questions. Questions one through twelve were designed basically to obtain demographic information from the population. The rest of the questions were designed to elicit information pertaining to each respondent's personal experience and adjustment process following relocation.

RESULTS

The sampling population was comprised predominantly of white,

upper-middle class couples. One-half (50.82%) of the respondents were between the ages of 30 and 40. Fifty-seven percent of the children were under age 12. From the 68 families who reported annual income, a median of $34,500 was obtained.

For the majority of respondents (92.6%), relocation was work-related. Forty-seven point five percent indicated that their move was due to promotion. For many, it also appeared that the move to Atlanta was not a one-time experience but only one move among many as required by the corporate executive's profession. The transient nature of their lifestyle was reflected by the fact that 66% had lived in their previous residence less than five years.

It is interesting that 60.8% felt that their present neighborhood was not similar to the previous one. The majority described their new neighborhood as being better, nicer, more affluent, friendlier, younger, and having more "community" type living with organized activities. This, in conjunction with other data, suggests upward mobility. It also demonstates the respondent's tendency to choose neighborhoods where inhabitants will share similar characteristics such as age and high geographic as well as socioeconomic mobility. The "planned" community atmosphere with every kind of club from garden to country accelerates the rate of meeting new neighbors and promotes group cohesion.

Sources of Stress

Differences Among Husbands and Wives

Significant differences were found between the degree of some of the feelings experienced by the male and female respondents after relocation.

Using the chi-square test, significant differences were found between families and females at the .05 level for boredom ($x^2 = 4.37$), depression ($x^2 = 4.91$), loss ($x^2 = 5.38$), and enthusiasm ($x^2 = 5.38$). A significant difference existed at the .01 level for loneliness ($x^2 = 20.43$). After relocation women experienced the "negative" emotions of boredom, loss, depression and loneliness to a significant degree more than men. On the other hand, men experienced enthusiasm significantly more than their wives. This dichotomy of the positive feelings of the male and negative feelings of the female counterpart may create stress and conflict within the family system at a time when it does not have the adaptive resources to withstand it.

Significant differences between males and females were also found concerning the most difficult aspects of moving for each group. More women experienced difficulty with personal adjustment ($x^2 = 9.44$) and finding a suitable home/neighborhood ($x^2 = 5.29$). These findings are significant at the .05 level.

Other Stressors

Major changes in lifestyle resulted from higher mortgages for 65.6%, recreational activities for 45%, family get togethers for 34.4%, and financial state for 33.6%. Other items noted were: opposition from parents; pregnant wife; family problems which came into focus and which the respondent hoped would be solved or not be present after moving; pressure to succeed in the new job; leaving close relationships; problems with a new house; fear of the unknown; loss of wife's income; and, higher than anticipated cost of living.

In response to the question, "The next time I move the things I will do differently are . . ." The majority of respondents indicated that they would change house hunting and buying tactics. Several respondents indicated

problems with the construction company building their homes and financing. Some individuals stated they would buy a house already completed or an older home; others wanted a newer home.

Respondents frequently indicated problems with moving companies and stated they would evaluate movers more thoroughly prior to the move and watch them more closely during the move. The few who moved themselves indicated that they would not do so again. A few respondents stated that they would check further into the quality of education offered in a potential community and also investigate churches. Some of the female respondents expressed problems with organization and said they would allow more time preparing for the move and packing.

Thirteen respondents stated they either did not expect and/or want to move again. This is not only indicative of persons unwilling to go through another stressful situation, but in some cases, a denial of reality. One respondent answered, "There is no easy way," which seems to appropriately sum up all the expressed feelings.

ADAPTATION TO STRESS

These data suggest implications for families, communities and corporations which might contribute to the family's adjustments to a new community.

Family Considerations

1. The differential reaction among family members, especially husbands and wives, suggests the need for frequent, open, supportive communication during this period of high stress. Home interview data indicate that while the need to maintain frequent communication may seem obvious, there are often

problems in this area, such as the husband becoming preoccupied with proving himself on the job, or the woman distancing herself from the family. The need to maintain open communication during times of stress is supported by the findings of McCubbin (1979).

2. Home interview data indicate that those families who demonstrated clear joint perceptions concerning the demands of the husband's career and relocation adjusted more readily than those who did not. This finding suggests the need for conjoint decision making among families prior to a move. Additionally, role clarification and differentiation around the tasks surrounding the move facilitated adjustment. These findings are supported by the findings of Litwack (Packard, 1972), and McCubbin (1979), who postulate the need for familial integration as a coping strategy in adjusting to stress.

3. McCubbin (1979) discusses the need to attack the stressing event directly for successful coping. These data suggest that those families who: (a) acquire accurate information about the new community; (b) monitor the move carefully; (c) take the initiative to meet their neighbors and get involved in a new church, club or neighborhood organization; and (d) inquire about schools, physicians, or grocery stores, adjust more quickly than those who do not. Such families view adjustment as a challenge, and assertively complete the required tasks.

4. Litwack's (Packard, 1972) theory that group cohesion can be maintained where neighborhood turnover is rapid can be seen in motion in the transient suburbs of Atlanta. Respondents found their neighbors to be friendlier and more responsive in mobile as opposed to more stable neighborhoods. Couples anticipating a move might look for neighborhoods

which will be more likely to integrate them into the mainstream of social and recreational life.

Community Supports

1. The corporate executive's wife appears to experience more stress as a result of relocation than does her husband. Such women might benefit from a supportive group experience in which they could freely discuss their feelings of loneliness, depression, boredom and loss. Groups could be sponsored by a local family service agency, mental health clinic, church or newcomer's club.

2. The findings of this study point to the need for collective group and support activities to be offered by the community for its new members. Churches (27.87%), newcomer's club (50%), or subdivision organizations (13.1%) were listed most often in aiding in the respondent's adjustment process. Early induction into the community by such organizations maintains group cohesion (Packard, 1972), which decreases the severity of the emotional impact of relocation. In addition to providing a source of group identification such groups may provide a context in which friendships may be found. Moreover, these organizations might be an excellent source for disseminating information about the community and its resources.

3. Moving companies and real estate agencies need to be more fully aware of their role in contributing to the adjustment of newly relocated families. These findings point to the variability of the moving and house hunting experiences. The quality of the services rendered may be measured both in terms of business and human relations functions, that is, real estate agents who both match families to neighborhoods, negotiate contracts

skillfully, and arrange financing while also checking on the availability of day care services in the area or who bring a tray of cold cuts on moving day are perceived as especially helpful.

The Corporation

The finding that only 33% of the respondent's felt their employment situation aided their adjustment to the new community has serious implications. Positive intervention on the part of the corporation could affect the employee's adjustment to the new job as well as the community. If the family is unable to quickly and successfully adapt to its new environment, psychological problems are created which may result in dysfunctional family patterns as well as low levels of job performance. As Gaylord (1979) suggests, the more the corporation adopts its programs to the needs of the employees, the more effective it will ultimately be in meeting its own goals.

Specifically, companies might offer relocation services for the families of transferred employees. Seminars to discuss the social, logistical, emotional and financial implications of a move might be initiated. Raises and mortgage differential policies could be adjusted in light of the findings that many employee families experience economic hardship. Further, companies might offer their own support group activities, or work cooperatively with community agencies (for example, newcomer's clubs or family service agencies) in the community to develop such activities. Moreover, companies might assume responsibility for assisting wives, many of whom give up jobs to move with their husbands, in employment searches.

SUMMARY

Voydanoff (1980) states that "much more needs to be done to develop coping strategies and supports for corporate families (p. 493)." We agree and are hopeful that the findings of this study will provide a source of

information for those interested in developing needed strategies and supports.

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